

Film journeys

by [James M. Wall](#) in the [October 2, 2007](#) issue

In early childhood Ben was diagnosed with a mild form of autism. His mother, who loves him dearly, is determined to help him move through the terrors of life in a high school where bullies torment him and classmates laugh at his suffering.

Ben is played with touching vulnerability by Greg Timmermans in the Belgian/Dutch film *Ben X*, which won the ecumenical jury award and shared the main jury award for best feature film at this year's Montreal Film Festival.

In his first feature film, director Nic Balthazar shows a profound awareness of Ben's condition and what is involved in an autistic boy's perilous journey through the teen years.

After a career as a film critic and a television game and talk show host, Balthazar decided to write a book after reading about the suicide of a young man with autism and hearing the response of the boy's mother, who said, "Nothing will ever comfort me."

Balthazar realized that his book might not offer comfort to the mother, but perhaps "some understanding and sympathy." When a one-man stage play based on the book had 250 sold-out performances, Balthazar decided to create a film version.

Ben's mother (Marijke Pinoy) demonstrates her love by patiently accepting his compulsive, repetitive behaviors and indulging him in his devotion to video games. Although several teachers show compassion for Ben, and some classmates hover about looking for ways to support him, Ben seems to ignore them.

It is not until he returns home to his favorite interactive game, ArchLord, that he acts out his anger by waging war with video characters. The film includes long animated segments of Ben's adventures in cyberspace as ArchLord, the ruler of medieval Chantra who destroys monsters.

Scarlite, a beautiful young cyberspace woman (Laura Verlinden), fights by his side. She becomes so real that in a local coffee shop they discuss his obsession with

suicide. When Scarlite makes a strong case that suicide is not a good solution to anything, Ben knows she's right.

Ben X received a standing ovation at the festival—a rare occurrence that attracted the attention of North American film distributors.

September Dawn, directed by Christopher Cain and starring Jon Voight as a fictional Mormon bishop, deals with September 11, 1857, a moment in American history when religious fanaticism led to the death of 140 people. The film mixes fiction with fact to examine the massacre of a wagon train of pioneers from Missouri, most of them Methodists, in southern Utah.

As the travelers approach New Mexico Territory, a Mormon bishop gives them permission to rest in an open field called Mountain Meadows. But while they rest, local Mormon leaders plan their deaths.

The leaders stoke the anger and fear of the Mormons by reminding them that the men, women and children camped in Mountain Meadows are their “sworn enemies,” and by claiming that the Mormons will soon be attacked by the U.S. army. Mormons had been persecuted in Missouri and Illinois, and Joseph Smith, founder of the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints, had been murdered in Nauvoo, Illinois. In the movie, the massacre becomes a religiously driven act of revenge.

The actual role of national Mormon leaders in the 1857 massacre remains in dispute. However, Sally Denton's book *American Massacre: The Tragedy at Mountain Meadows, September 1857*, makes a strong case that the Mormons who carried out the murders were acting under orders from their superiors.

Cain's powerful film has opened in North American theaters to largely unfavorable reviews. Although the reviews do not mention the link, the viewer will be reminded of the attack on the U.S. on September 11, 2001, and of the subsequent war initiated by the U.S. against a civilian population in Iraq—both of which involved elements of revenge and religious absolutism.

John D. Lee, the only person ever brought to trial in a U.S. court for the massacre, was executed by a firing squad on March 23, 1877. In the film there are also brief appearances by an aging Brigham Young (played by Terence Stamp). In words taken from his legal testimony, Young denies any foreknowledge of the massacre.

In her book, Denton reports that in denying Lee's final appeal for clemency in 1877, the Utah Territory supreme court stated, "it has not yet been brought out clearly in the evidence that Brigham Young ordered this massacre of the Arkansas emigrants, but the implication comes so near that he is convicted in the mind of every person who is acquainted with the facts."

The Mormon Church, however, continues to defend Joseph Smith. In 1999, the church installed at the massacre site the latest of several plaques that blame "a party of local Mormon settlers and Indians," who attacked the wagon train "for reasons not fully understood." The plaque is contradicted by Paiute Native American leaders, who insist that they were "wrongfully blamed for assisting in something that was not of their making."

Religious zeal also emerges in Spanish director Ray Loriga's film *Teresa*, a portrait of a saint-to-be struggling against a male-dominated society. Teresa of Ávila (1515-1582) was the child of two noble Catholic families. Contrarian Teresa learned to read and write at a time when these were rare skills for girls. She also felt an early call to enter into a spiritual union with God by becoming a nun in the Carmelite Order.

Teresa's religious poems, which have become classics in Spanish literature, describe an intense longing for oneness with God that has led some to call them love poems with erotic undertones. Jean-Jacques Antier's biography *Teresa of Ávila* reports on an intense teenage relationship Teresa had with a young male cousin and suggests that the temptations of the relationship brought about a crisis of faith.

While the relationship most likely did not involve a consummated sexual experience, Teresa wrote: "With the thought that my deeds would not be known, I dared to do many things truly against my honor and against God." Director Loriga strives to depict Teresa's struggle to transcend her personal behavior and achieve a perfect union with God, but with limited success.

Loriga faced a formidable challenge: while he wanted his story to be faithful to Teresa's work, he knew that her 16th-century language would seem uncomfortably erotic to modern ears. At one point he depicts a vision of Teresa's in which she sees herself in a naked embrace with Jesus.

Loriga is more successful in depicting the efforts of Teresa and other Carmelites to return the order to the primitive Rule of Carmel, which, "in the spirit of the desert," calls for "silence, poverty, strict enclosure"—everything that, to them, points to

union with God. The Catholic Church resisted the movement, but Teresa gained support from influential friends, including St. John of the Cross.

The result was the formation of the Discalced (barefoot) Carmelite Order. It founded a chain of small monasteries throughout Spain, starting in 1562 with St. Joseph's in Ávila. Forty years after Teresa's death in 1682, she was canonized as a saint. She is remembered as a reformer, spiritual leader, essayist, poet and the first woman to be named a doctor of the church by the Vatican.